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ABSTRACT

The open door of the community college too often becomes a revolving door when student needs are not met and program quality decreases. Case studies highlight instances in which community colleges' open access policies, teamed with inadequate advising and hard-sell recruitment tactics, can frustrate the goal achievement of underprepared students. A response by community colleges to the issue of open access should resolve questions related to: (1) defining the competencies needed for a reasonable chance of success in each program offered; (2) assessing students to determine if they have the requisite competencies and to place them appropriately; (3) providing alternative programs for students lacking minimum competencies; (4) analyzing the length of time students must pursue remedial programs and other alternatives before they are told if they qualify for their first choice programs; (5) providing accurate information regarding pre-programs and chances of admission to programs of original choice; (6) offering skills programs to help improve student employability; and (7) obtaining adequate funding for services provided for underprepared students. Attempts to serve all students without regard to their preparation for the services offered increase the difficulty of providing the educational quality and depth needed by those with the ability to derive the maximum benefit from the community college. (LAL)

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FUTURE OF THE OPEN DOOR: A PRESENTATION FOR ACCT

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Let me begin by stating categorically that I believe in open access. Where I differ with some of my colleagues is in the way I define open access and in my concern that the open door with which open access is sometimes confused should not become a revolving door. In brief, I believe it is morally wrong to hold out an empty hand and, like the little boy in Hans Christian Anderson's story about The Emperor's New Clothes, I am unwilling to accept hearsay evidence about what is in the hand. I want to see it with my very own eyes.

Let me give you several case studies to illustrate my point. The facts are accurate, only the names and locations have been changed to protect those who prefer to believe the emperor is clothed in sartorial splendor, even though to some of us he appears as naked as the day he came into the world.

Jody, who is 23, dropped out of high school in the 9th grade. His life experience since then has involved a succession of unskilled part-time jobs, none of which he has held for longer than a few months. In between, he has been on and off welfare. He attempted to enlist in the Army, but was turned down because of his inability to read or write at the minimum required level. Last summer, he was killing time at the shopping center near where he lived when he saw a display sponsored by Hard Sell Community College. The attractive brochures promised an opportunity for a rewarding career and emphasized the

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availability of financial aid. Having nothing to lose, Jody showed up shortly before classes began. After screening by the admissions office, Jody was assigned to 12 hours of remedial and personal development courses, which will make him eligible to receive financial aid as a full-time student. A maximum of 15 hours of these types of courses may be applied to a general education degree at Hard Sell, although they are not acceptable for completing the general education requirements for any career program, rewarding or otherwise. If Jody's experience is like some of the non-traditional applicants responding to Hard Sell's marketing program, he will spend up to two years in remedial courses preparing for that entry level college English course, which he never cared that much about taking originally. More likely, he will remain an intermittent student attending and qualifying for financial aid when he cannot find alternatives that are more rewarding.

Samantha has always wanted to be a nurse for as long as she can remember. Unfortunately, her high school counselors did not view her as college material and advised her into courses that did not prepare her for the admission requirements for the nursing program at Bait and Switch Community College. When Samantha applied, she was told that while admission to the college was open door, admission to programs such as nursing required special qualifications that she did not have. However, not-to-worry; these deficiencies could be corrected by enrolling in a pre-nursing program. If she passed the required courses in chemistry, math, and literature, she would be eligible for consideration for admission to the nursing program. Not being very sophisticated about these matters, Samantha assumed that passing the required sequence of courses meant automatic admission to the program of her dreams. What the admissions office at B and S did not tell Samantha was that far more qualified students applied to nursing than could ever be accommodated.

In fact, 33% of the students currently enrolled in the nursing program are reverse transfers from some of the states best universities and almost half of these hold a bachelors degree. There is also a pool of well-qualified high school graduates who did not have Samantha's unfortunate experience with their high school counselors. Finally, in the interests of maximizing enrollments which serve as the basis for state reimbursement, B and S maintains an open door in the prenursing program so the number of students who enroll exceed by a factor of 3 to 1 the number who can be admitted from this pool. Samantha, while highly motivated and persistent, has never been a really strong student so the probability is that she will not gain admission, but be advised instead to pursue her degree in one of the less popular areas of the B and S curriculum.

Rodney, like Jody, dropped out of school in the 9th grade. Unlike Jody, however, Rodney knows what he wants to do. His uncle works as a meat cutter at an area super market, and in conversations with Rodney, has helped him decide that meat cutting is a skill he would like to learn. While undergoing employment counseling with a representative from the state employment service, Rodney learned about a skills center operated by Status Oriented Community College. The skills center, relying primarily on federal funds, offers a variety of programs ranging from several months to one year in areas such as meat cutting, auto mechanics, office trades and the like. These programs do not carry college credit and those who finish them are not awarded any degree or certificate. However, they have been extremely successful in taking people like Rodney and providing them with efficient combinations of literacy and job-related skills. Their completers do get jobs in the field for which they have trained; on this point the record is quite clear.

Unfortunately, shortly after Rodney found out about the program, and while he was still in the process of making application, the federal government reduced its support for these types of programs dramatically, asserting that education was a state responsibility and that states and the local communities had to assume a larger share of the costs. The state where Status Oriented operates funds its community colleges on the basis of credit hours generated in approved college parallel and career courses. The formula does not extend to the work that is done in the Skills Center. When the trustees of Status Oriented were asked to consider assuming the additional costs to maintain the Skills Center operation, they refused to do so stating that they could not afford to take over federal programs. As a result, meat cutting and several other programs at the Skills Center had to be dropped. Of course, Rodney still has the opportunity of attending programs like the ones offered at Hard Sell, where he will be able to qualify for financial aid and spend several semesters preparing for an entry level college English class while achieving self actualization through the personal development offerings. In the meantime, the federal government may relent so that Rodney can drop out, and go and become a meat cutter like he wanted to originally.

Many of you will say that it is extremely unfair to judge any community college by a few obviously extreme examples. I agree, but I would add, it is equally unfair to judge them by a few extreme examples in the opposite direction such as the baseball star pitcher or the corporation president. One problem with both views is that they interfere with a realistic approach to the issue of open access. Talking about the Jodys, the Samanthas, and the Rodneys leads to defensive responses. Talking about the star pitchers and the

corporation presidents leads to euphoria where questioning current practice is tantamount to defiling motherhood, free enterprise, and the Bill of Rights, all in the same breath.

A considered response to the issue of open access must resolve at least the following questions:

1. To what extent does your institution define the competencies needed for a reasonable chance of success in each of the programs you offer.

2. To what extent do you assess all students, both full and part-time, to make certain they have the minimum competencies you have defined as essential to success? What provisions exist to require appropriate placement as distinct from advisory placements?

3. What alternatives do you provide for students who lack minimum entering competencies? Do you limit them to remedial and personal development offerings, or do you also offer programs teaching vocational skills?

4. How long must students pursue these alternatives before they are told whether or not they qualify for the program of their original choice? What standards of progress do you apply? How are they monitored?

5. When students agree to enter pre-programs to remedy deficiencies are they given accurate information in writing

about their chances for admission to the program of original choice? (For example, Bait and Switch admits all interested applicants to its pre-nursing program. Approximately 40% of those who complete the pre-nursing program are subsequently admitted to nursing. those who are admitted have an average GPA of 3.0).

6. Do you as trustees insist upon accurate information about what happens to students who enter remedial courses or pre-programs?

7. If you admit students whose reading, writing, and numeracy skills suggest that they are not good candidates for any of your regular degree and certificate programs, do you insist upon offering skills programs such as meat cutting to help them become employable? Do you make certain that these kinds of programs get the funding they need to provide the same level of quality you expect from your other programs?

8. Does your state explicitly recognize the services you are providing to those without the reading, writing, and numeracy skills to attempt standard certificate and degree programs? Are you given adequate funding for these programs and services so that offering them does not drain off resources needed to maintain quality in traditional programs?

The quality of open access in your college - that is to say, what you hold in the hand you are extending is heavily dependent upon how you answer these questions. However well-intentioned your staff may be, it is naive to assert that there is no relationship between quality and quantity as did a community college president friend of mine a few years back. He was quoted as saying that college resources in terms of constant dollars per student, had declined by 14%. He assured the board, however, that the quality of the college's programs or services had not been affected. If those of you who believe that statement will meet me outside after the program, I have some choice desert lots I'd like to show you.

Seriously, if you hold dollars constant or worse, reduce them, there is an obvious and inverse relationship between quality and quantity. The more you do with fixed resources, the less likely you are to do anything well. We all know the $32.95 blender in the same brand has more quality features than the one for $24.50. Why we believe that education is not subject to the same resource allocation rules as other human enterprize, is a mystery to me. In the environment of the 80s we cannot afford to delude ourselves and we are unlikely to be able to delude others. In such an environment, I believe that the essence of open access rests with deciding what it is most important to do and then doing that as well as possible. To the extent we try to serve everyone without regard to their preparation for the services we offer, the more difficult it will be for us to provide the quality and depth needed by those who have the ability to derive maximum benefit from our institutions.

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